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CHAPTER IV

THE GOOD OLD DAYS

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THE DRAGALEVTSY of 1937 had much in common with the Dragalevtsy of the past centuries. The dances, the homes, and the farm practices proved that. The differences were also marked. For instance, a crude but efficient means of population control in the good old days was the killing off of the old people when they had passed the period of active usefulness. That at least was the theme of an old folk tale still current in the village. "It so happened that one spring the people discovered that they had saved no grain for sowing. The king sent men everywhere in search of grain, only to see them return empty-handed. One son, who at considerable risk to himself had kept his aged father alive, secretly hidden in his home, told him of the people's distress. The old man said: 'Tell the people to go to the ant hills for grain.' Some of the men followed this suggestion and found the grain they were hunting. When the king learned that an old man had told them where to look he ordered that the aged should not be killed for their disability but should be kept alive and respected for their wisdom."

195 Just at what time this story became a part of the folklore was difficult to determine, because of the numerous racial mixtures which the people represent. The Pechenegi, according to all accounts, might have been the ones who practiced this parricide. They got themselves into the history books by driving the Magyars (the modern Hungarians) westward from what is now Russia in the latter part of the ninth century. For about two hundred years more they, allied first with one prince and then with another, raided tribe after tribe and lurked near important trade routes. In 1091 the Pechenegi who had survived previous setbacks were finally destroyed by the Crusaders under Peter the Hermit, and little was heard of them after that.

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One account[1] in the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* describes their nomadic existence and the camps they formed out of rings of wagons. "They wore long beards and mustachios, and were dressed in long kaftans. The food of the wealthy was blood and mares' milk; of the poor, millet and mead. They were originally 'magicians', i.e., fire-worshippers; but a form of Islam early became current among them, and the nation was temporarily converted to Christianity in 1007-1008. They were the most dreaded and detested of all the nomads." They were disagreeable in other ways too. But when the writer goes on to describe the *Shopi* of today, the descendants of these Pechenegi, as "despised by the other inhabitants of Bulgaria for their bestiality and stupidity but dreaded for their savagery," I wondered how much he was letting historical antecedents influence his description of the present. He goes on to say: "They are a singularly repellent race, short-legged, yellow-skinned, with slanting eyes and projecting cheekbones. Their villages are generally filthy, but the women's costumes show a barbaric profusion of gold lace." The *Shopi* then have quite a reputation to live up to—bestial, stupid, savage, ugly, filthy, and barbaric in their tastes. Some of these definitely do apply. My version of the *Shopi* necessarily includes some positive as well as negative traits, for I have lived among them and have learned to see their good as well as their bad points.

But I must admit that if one looks to the Bulgarian ancestors of the *Shopi* for the origin of the parricide story, he will also find forebears capable of such a deed. According to Henry N. Brailsford's *Macedonia* the Volga-men, or Bulgarians, "were polygamists, owned slaves, and were accustomed to military discipline. Like the Turks they shaved their heads and wore pigtails. They burned their widows and indulged in human sacrifices." This is not a pretty picture, but one which bears marked resemblances to the accounts of the tribes in western Europe before the spread of civilization to that area.

The killing of feeble parents has been a common practice among nomadic peoples because of the difficulty of caring for the aged and infirm when on the move. The mention of grain in the story quoted above would indicate that the tribe had settled down, and that parri-

[1] [i.e. the Pechenegi, Bulgarian ancestors--ANALYST]

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888 cide was by that time an out-of-date practice no longer linked with the precarious economic existence of a wandering people.

539 But it was a far cry from the cessation of the killing of aged
988 parents to the "Honor thy father and mother" of the Decalogue, which
593 later became a part of the Bulgarian family system. The peasants had another story to explain this dramatic change:

"In the olden days, when fathers died the sons would drag the bodies with a hook to a stream or gully and push the bodies in. One day a middle-aged man returned home from disposing of his father's body in this way, but failed to bring back the hook. Whereupon his own son in greeting him said:

" 'But, father, where is the hook? What will I use when I drag you away?'

"This made the father thoughtful, then remorseful. It was then that he retrieved his father's body and gave it a proper burial. Since then sons have been more respectful."

593 At any rate, whatever may be the explanation, the patriarchal
562 system with its respect for and obedience to the father won out. Con-
175 tact with Byzantine culture until the coming of the Turks must have
186 reinforced the Bulgarian father's right to dominate his family. He became more fully acquainted with the *patria potestas* which had been too strongly entrenched in the Roman family system to be forgotten by the Byzantines. Likewise, the patriarchal emphasis of the Old Testament and the Pauline epistles of the New aided in the continuance
175 of male supremacy. It is fascinating indeed to observe the response that the Slavicized Bulgarians made to the Byzantine culture in general. First they opposed cultural assimilation by force of arms; more than once the armies of the Bulgarian kings thundered at the gates of Constantinople in Bulgaria's proud golden age (about 900). Military expeditions, however, proved inadequate, with the result that the Bulgarian leaders sought to build a Slavic culture to rival that of the Greeks. It was this new culture which kept the feeling of national uniqueness alive among the Bulgarians, while other tribes upon entering that region became so thoroughly absorbed into the Byzantine Empire that they ended as curious names of the past with no modern representatives.

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[369] 857 With Sofia, a city of over a quarter million people, only five miles away, the ability of the villagers to resist, however passively, the influence of the "people of the world" was astonishing. It was a remoteness, not to be measured in miles, but in generations.

Such pleasant customs as keeping pets were almost nonexistent. The tiny puppies with which the children sometimes rolled were bred for strictly utilitarian purposes, to guard the sheep, and were taught to be unfriendly to man.

[888] The very young and the very old in the village spent much time together. When I was taken to pay my respects to the oldest man in the village, a venerable figure of over a century, we found him sitting in a sunny corner of the yard under a gnarled pine tree. Tumbling around him were half a dozen tiny children, somewhat hampered in their movements by their clumsy, heavy clothing but very proud to show off their ancient relative.

The older children derived a quiet amusement from their position as spectators at the village ceremonies. There were always little boys making merry along the path of a wedding procession or tramping along wide-eyed beside a funeral. At *Subori* and *hora* mischievous little boys were ubiquitous. The little girls stayed solemnly by their mothers, only their eyes wandered, alternately solemn and amused. The village child had no routine planned for him, either for his physical or his psychological needs. There was no emphasis upon self-expression for the child, only upon conformity to the routine of the family.

858 593 Yet there was warmth and affection for the children. When a child died, the tempo of the household perceptibly slackened. "It is God's will. It is Kismet [Fate]," the family said, but the father grew more taciturn and the mother wept silently as she spun in the evenings. And when a funeral procession reached the cemetery, the new mourners often found there other mothers who had lost their children. These wailed again for the long-departed and begged the spirit of the newly dead to carry messages to their babies.

And when a family grew rich according to village standards, it was on the children that gifts were lavished, perhaps a wish-fulfillment by the elders inherited from their own drab childhood.

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668 578 554 178 do. Owing to the Communistic agitation in Dragalevtsy, lines were more sharply drawn between the peasants on the one hand and the artisans on the other. Most of the artisans had learned their trade in Sofia, had been subjected to city influences, and many of them had become acquainted with Communist ideas there before the war. Even Bai Milosh, the village patriarch so frequently mentioned in this account, had a son who had become an ardent Communist. This son was not the one who took over the management of field crops, nor the one responsible for the livestock. Instead he had become a cobbler. He thought of himself as a worker, whereas his brothers thought of themselves as farmers.

668 578 178 [888] Quarreling between the young and old also characterized the factionalism. Although the Agrarian young people opposed the Communists, they were certainly influenced by the actions of their more progressive or radical contemporaries. The older peasants who were opposed to the present regime emphasized time and time again the danger of having young people run the affairs of the land. This displacement of the aged rather than the indifference of Communists to God seemed to be causing the gravest concern to those who had been steeped in the traditional way of life.

668 179 626 But factionalism was not the only pronounced change which I noted. I found everywhere an insecurity which was foreign to the Dragalevtsy I had once known. The opposition supporters could be expected to feel insecure, for they had to face the possibility that Communism would carry the day. But even the Communists who were definitely in the good graces of the party were having many troubled moments. The wife of one Communist was active in the opposition, and when I asked him why he tolerated such political division in his family he simply laughed. I continued to question him: "Aren't you the boss in this family? Why do you let your wife have such independence?"

He then became deadly serious and sought to lead me out of my cloud of ignorance. "You see, it's this way. Suppose the Communists are overthrown. Where would I be then? But if my wife is active in the Agrarian group, she can then speak for me and get me out of trouble."